

Everything Opened by diapason

Category: Stranger Things, 2016

Genre: Friendship, Sci-Fi

Language: English

Characters: Eleven/Jane H., J. Hopper, Mike W., Will B.

Pairings: Mike W./Eleven/Jane H.

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2018-04-21 00:26:42

Updated: 2019-07-01 09:21:29

Packaged: 2019-12-12 18:39:52

Rating: T

Chapters: 8

Words: 12,203

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: Filling in the holes at the end of season two, and then some. Follows canon to the end of season two, rated T for some swearing but nothing worse than the show.

1. Chapter 1

November 4, 1984

No one said a word on the ride back. One way or another, it was all over, and all they could do was stare out the windows, count stop signs, try their best to pretend they didn't notice the way Mike trembled under the yellow light of every passing streetlamp, *wait*.

When they got to the Byers', Mike went straight for Will's room, digging up his supercom and calling out again and again until Steve pried it from his fingers.

"That thing's range is way too short-"

Mike wrestled it back. "That's not the point-"

"She's probably really drained," Dustin offered. "She'll need time to recharge."

"The chief will bring her back here," Lucas reasoned. "Sit down."

But Mike *couldn't* sit down. Everything in him buzzed. He walked up and down the hall, walked circles around the kitchen table, stopping only to look out the front windows every time he passed. He mentally calculated over and over the time it should take them to drive back from the lab. He added the time it might take them if they had to stop for gas. And go to the bathroom. And change a flat tire. He imagined everything that could've possibly gone wrong, counting every miserable second of an hour before the crunch of gravel and headlights through the window signaled company.

He was out the door in a heartbeat. Steve tumbled after him, swearing, and caught him by the jacket just before he could throw himself off the porch. "We did not survive all that just for you to get run over-"

It was Jonathan.

They spilled from the car, sweaty and exhausted and triumphant. Joyce was last, cradling Will to her chest. "He's alright," she

whispered as they rushed in, giving them a shaky smile. "He's alright, it's gone, it's gone, he's sleeping. Shh. He's sleeping." Everyone followed as she carried him up the porch steps and inside. "Don't wake him up. Here, help me put him in bed." Jonathan pulled back his sheets as Joyce laid him down, and they both tucked him carefully in as the others watched from the doorway.

Nancy moved quietly beside Mike.

"Have you talked to Chief Hopper?" he asked.

"A little. Our connection was bad. They closed the gate. They were bringing Dr. Owens to the hospital, but we told them to come here after."

"Eleven's okay?"

"... I'm sure she's fine."

Mike huffed.

Nancy pulled him suddenly into a hug, and for a moment, he was too surprised to move. "I'm really glad you're okay," she whispered.

Immediately, guilt grabbed hold of him. Once again, he'd gotten so lost in his own head and his fear of losing Eleven that he'd forgotten she'd already lost Barbara- and tonight she'd gone with Jonathan as he'd fought not to lose Will. *She was scared to lose him, too.* He hesitated, then leaned into her. "You, too."

"... Oh my god, you *reek*. Like gasoline. What did you do?"

Again, headlights blinked in the windows, and again, Mike was running out the door with Steve right behind him. Finally, it was Hopper's SUV... passenger seat empty.

Terror curled its fingers around Mike's heart and squeezed. He stumbled, and Steve caught him. "Where is she?" he shouted, voice hoarse. "Where is she?"

The Chief climbed out, turning wordlessly to open the back door.

Laid in the back seat, blood smeared from her nose all the way down her neck, black shirt glittering with it- "El." The Chief brushed a wild curl from her face. "Come on, kid," he murmured. "Mike's here."

Her eyelids fluttered. "Mike?"

All the air rushed from his lungs, and his eyes filled with tears, but a breathless smile pulled at his lips. "Eleven." He tore free from Steve, flying off the porch and elbowing his way past Hopper. He held her tight as he could, and she curled her fingers in his shirt with a sigh.

The others hovered on the porch, unable to move, all too afraid to ask.

"It's over," Hopper told them. "It's all over."

"Three weeks after she disappeared, Thomas Barnes came to me claiming he'd been attacked by a wild little boy in the woods. Stole his coat and hat. I started leaving food for her, and she came out right after Christmas, so we fixed up the cabin and I've been taking care of her there."

"All by yourself?"

"Joyce... I'm sorry. I didn't want to give you something else to worry about. I did the best I could."

"No." It was Nancy, wrapped up in a blanket, glaring at him from across the room. "You shouldn't have kept them apart."

Every head in the room turned to where Mike and Eleven slept on the living room couch. In the dark, their bodies were indistinguishable. It was intimate in a way that hurt to watch; Hopper looked down into his coffee instead. "They were watching him even closer than they were watching me, and if they'd thought for a moment that she was alive, that she was here, they would not have hesitated to use him to get to her." He looked her in the eyes. "Or to kill him if he got between them and what they wanted."

Nancy paled. Jonathan reached over to cover her hand with his.

"So, what now?" Joyce demanded. "You continue to hide her out there?"

"Yes and no."

"Hop."

"I... convinced Dr. Owens to help her. She'll still have to lay low for a while, but soon... soon for real this time... she can start to live."

"With Dr. Owens?"

"No! No." Again, he looked down into his coffee. "With me."

It was nearly one in the morning before they all stepped once more out of the Byers' house and into the moonlight. Billy led Max to his car in silence; she gave them all a reassuring little wave as they pulled away. Steve volunteered to drive the rest of them home, but as they piled into the car, Mike hung back, holding tight to Eleven's hand.

"Go on, kid," Hopper murmured, taking one last draw from his cigarette before squashing it under his boot. "Go get some sleep."

Mike only glared.

Hopper hoped the ache it put in his gut didn't show, and rolled his eyes. "You don't trust me? Fine. Trust her. I couldn't keep her from you now if I wanted to. God himself couldn't."

Mike looked down at Eleven, searching her face. "Promise?"

She clearly didn't want to leave either, but she nodded. "Promise."

November 5, 1984

They'd tried to call Will from the phone at school, but Ms. Byers had told them not to worry, he was fine, he was still resting, the whole ordeal had really wiped him out, they had to head home and get some rest too. Lucas, Dustin, and Max seemed eager enough to do so,

but Mike had other plans. After splitting from the others, he biked home as fast as he could. He dumped his bookbag in the den, promised his mother he'd start on the chores he'd missed over the weekend, then ran up to his room and grabbed his supercom, shutting himself in his closet.

For a long moment, he could only sit in anxious silence. What if she wasn't there?

"Eleven?" he finally whispered.

Nothing... and then, clear as day, "Mike."

He fought the lump of emotion that rose in his throat, the tears that he didn't want. "How do I find you?"

Mike might not have slept properly in over three days, but he'd never been more awake. The world rushed by in a blur of reds and golds as he flew down woodsy back roads that hardly anyone else ever traveled. The autumn air was sharp in his throat and his legs ached but he only pushed himself harder around every corner he turned. She was here, she was here, she was there at the end, at the edge of the woods, messy hair and frumpy sweater and too-big jeans and big brown eyes on the verge of tears.

He didn't even slow down- just stepped off his bike and let it crash as he stumbled into her, wrapping her up. "You're okay?" he gasped.

She nodded against his shoulder, little hands curling into his jacket and holding on tight. Yet another wave of relief washed over him- he had to be at least six feet underwater by now. They stood there for ages, reveling in each other's warmth, both trying to convince themselves that if they let go, the other wouldn't disappear.

Eleven's hair tickled his cheek, and he managed to pull back enough to take in the soft curls that now tumbled over her forehead; the tears that streaked her cheeks; her nose, red from the-

"Are you cold?"

She led him through the trees, around snares and over trip wires to a cabin with boarded windows but steady smoke drifting from the chimney. "You've been here this whole time?" he asked as they stepped inside. It was warm, cozy, comfy even- but that wasn't what he meant. She'd been so *close*.

She slipped off his jacket, hanging it by the door, and tugged him to her room- small, plain, neat. They sat on her bed, fingers still locked, knees pressed together.

Looking at her, the shadow of her eyelashes on her cheeks and the little scar over her eyebrow and the tired curve of her shoulders, the pressure in his chest swelled until suddenly he couldn't take it anymore. "Tell me everything," he whispered.

"I went to the upside down, but I got back out, and I tried to go to you, but it wasn't safe. I had to keep you safe."

"I'm so sorry."

She shook her head, "It wasn't your fault."

"I still wish..."

"I know."

"Where did you go, then?"

"I hid in the woods... then here. Then mama's."

"Your mom's?"

"I thought I could be home with her, but she's stuck in her dream circle."

"Her dream circle? Like in a coma?"

"Coma?"

He ducked his head. Her bed sheets had little pink flowers on them. Had the Chief bought them for her? Did she like flowers? "It's... somewhere between sleep and death."

"No. More somewhere between sleep and awake," she mused. "But she showed me. She showed me my sister."

"You have a sister?"

She brushed her fingers absentmindedly over her wrist. "008."

"Oh." How many others were there?

"I found her. In Chicago. She thought I could be home with her there... but she was festering. She was like the bad men. She... she tried to use me to do bad things, and when I wouldn't... when I stopped her..."

She couldn't finish, but she didn't have to. He squeezed her hands.

"You were in danger, so I came back."

He weighed his words. "Back home?"

She trembled, reached up to touch his cheek, fingertips feather-light. The way she looked at him, with regret and relief bordering awe and something even more than love, made his heart do strange things. "Yes. Home." *Him*.

His heart broke all the way open, all the hurt and all the need of a year spent not knowing rushing out in a big awful mess. "I don't have the words..."

But of course he didn't need them. "It's okay. I know." And then, "Me, too."

He pulled her in and held on tight. "Never again." Never again would someone cage her, hurt her, use her. Never again would they be torn apart. "I promise."

2. Chapter 2

November 5, 1984

Everything that had happened and everything that hadn't happened and everything she'd wanted to tell him when he'd called her every night poured out of her. She spoke more than she'd spoken in her entire life, but he listened intently to every word, eyes full of wonder.

He asked all kinds of questions. Hard questions, about how she liked living with Hopper and whether she wanted to visit her mom again and whether she really thought Dr. Brenner was out there and why she didn't just look. They were questions she wouldn't have answered for anyone else, but she wanted to tell him everything. Even though she didn't always have the right words, he seemed to understand her anyways.

He asked little questions, too. He wanted to know her favorite flower and her favorite book and her favorite TV show and her favorite food, which he was amused to hear was still Eggos. He promised to bring her some next time.

Next time. The words came with a smile, and made her insides all warm. After all this time, after all she'd told him, she was still entirely, unconditionally wanted.

A knock on the door made them both jump- Hopper was home. Disappointment dropped heavy in her stomach, but only stayed a moment. They had time, she reminded herself, unlocking the door. They had all the time in the world.

November 6, 1984

The cabin where the Chief had been hiding Eleven was awfully far from school, but hey, they'd willingly walked into a monster-infested alternate dimension tunnel maze for her. They'd bike to Timbuktu for her, too.

Besides, all Max had to do was ride along on the back of Lucas's bike.

He smelled like cinnamon. Not so bad.

They biked as far out as they could, then stashed their bikes in the bushes to trek through the woods, climbing carefully over the booby traps Mike pointed out. They knocked a secret code on the cabin's front door, listened to the answering chorus of unlocking deadbolts- and there she was.

Max did a double take. She'd expected slicked back hair and smudgy punk eyeliner; this curly haired, *cherubic* girl in a pink sweater was almost unrecognizable.

The others were less surprised. "El!" Dustin and Lucas piled on. "We're glad you're feeling better!"

Eleven smiled, holding still until they stepped back. Then Mike pushed past them to hug her, and she held on like she never wanted to let go. It was every bit as golden as the moment they'd first reunited. Such hard people, Max mused, but together, they looked so *soft*. She stepped quietly around them, setting her things by Dustin and Lucas's.

"So this is your secret hideout," Dustin hummed, already poking around their bookshelf. "Does one of these open a hidden door?"

"Dude," Lucas smacked him, "seriously?"

"Woah!" Abandoning the books, Dustin swept across the room, starry-eyed. "What kind of radio is that?"

November 9, 1984

Friday, Hopper came home late, tired and anxious, and said, "Sit down, kid. This is important."

Nancy and Jonathan had sent out tapes that had rocketed the lab into the international spotlight. The FBI was coming- they might be even bigger bad guys. If she made it through their investigation, that was it. She'd be really, truly safe. But until then, they had to keep hiding, just like before. He was so, so sorry.

But Eleven didn't care. Not as long as she had Mike. He called her in the mornings when he woke up, just to tell her good morning and ask how she'd slept, and then right after school he came to the cabin. He brought her Eggos and held her hand and looked at her like she were his whole sky and told her he'd missed her since the moment he'd left the night before.

Dustin and Lucas and Max came, too. They chased away the shadows and filled the house with laughter. They brought cards or games or movies on tape, or simply spread out on the floor to do their homework, trying their best to explain it to her as they went.

("It's called the nervous system," Dustin finished.

"And these- your lungs- are how you breathe- that's the respiratory system," Lucas pointed to the picture in his book.

"And the vascular system, too," Mike told her. "When you breathe, in your lungs, the oxygen in the air goes into your blood, and your blood gets pumped through your whole body when your heart beats."

She put her hand over her heart. "Bah-bahmp."

"Yeah," he mirrored her, cheeks pink. "Bah-bahmp.")

She smiled at Hopper. "Alright," she told him.

"Alright?" he repeated, unsure.

"Yes. Alright."

A week ago she'd almost lost everything she'd ever wanted, but now she had more than she'd ever dared to hope for. It was the best kind of overwhelming. She'd never been this happy in her entire life.

November 10, 1984

Joyce and Jonathan had kept Will home from school all week, insisting he rest. Hopper had dropped by a few times, and they'd finally let the boys come over for a while on Friday, but they'd only now agreed to let him out of the house.

That morning was all clear skies and warm sunshine, perfect for a bike ride or a walk down the railroad tracks or holing himself in the arcade. Instead, he stood between his mom and Jonathan and watched as they lowered Bob Newby into the ground.

His was the last of fourteen funerals in Hawkins that week. Hopper had somehow ensured that the dead- both human and alien- would all be buried before the FBI could get their hands on them. He stood just behind Joyce, quiet but strong and steady. Mike and Lucas and Dustin and Max and Nancy and even Steve were there, too. They all knew the truth. That helped, if only a little.

Bob's parents had flown in from Maine. Standing on the other side of his grave, they cried and cried even harder than Joyce. They thought their son had been a helpless victim of a chemical leak at Hawkins Laboratory. They'd never know the truth.

The truth was that their son was the reason that his mom and Mike and Hopper did not have their own funerals today. Their son had volunteered to die so that they could live and fight. If he hadn't, they wouldn't have been able to get Eleven to the gate, and the mind flayer would have them all. He was a hero.

What a terrible kind of hero to be.

November 11, 1984

Sunday night, the Byers drove out to Hopper and Eleven's cabin for dinner. Joyce and Jonathan hovered over Will as they walked through the woods, as though he might fall over at any second and they were ready to catch him when he did. It was okay. He understood. But he had to show them he was doing better now if he wanted to go back to school tomorrow.

He *was* doing better- *much* better. He politely declined their help and climbed over a fallen tree by himself; the strain of his muscles and the way the air rushed from his lungs as he landed solidly on the other side felt too good to put into words.

Hopper opened the door for them with a smile, ruffling Will's hair as he stepped inside. It was warm, Bruce Springsteen's voice drifted up from the record player in the back, and whatever was cooking smelled delicious.

"Will!" Mike sat on the couch... and behind him could only be Eleven.

Will's heart skipped a beat. "Hi."

"How are you feeling?" Mike asked.

"I'm good."

Mike glanced back at Eleven and smiled. "I guess you still haven't met, huh? Will, this is Eleven."

Will couldn't pull his eyes from her. She was... not at all the way he'd imagined her.

She'd saved him, saved them all. He'd heard all about it, watched as his friends struggled with her disappearance- especially Mike. Still, she'd seemed far away, almost unreal, like a fallen hero in a comic book or even a martyred saint. But she'd come back and done it again, and now she was sitting on the end of the couch in too-big blue jeans and fuzzy socks.

"I- I don't know how to thank you."

She only shook her head. "I'm just happy you're okay."

He remembered that voice, so soft in the dark of the Upside Down. He'd thought she was an angel.

"Dinner's almost ready," Hopper announced. "Everyone grab a chair."

All through dinner, and even after, when they were all on the living room floor playing Chinese checkers, Will couldn't pull his eyes from her.

She was no comic book hero, no saint sent from above, no angel in the night. She was small. She was quiet. She jumped at loud noises or

sudden movements. *She was the same kind of damaged he was.*

And then Hopper would touch her shoulder, or Mike would take her hand, and her feet would find solid ground. She'd smile, only a little smile, but it was like the sun shining out of a person. In that instant, he could see the strength in the middle of her.

She could turn Jean Grey to dust.

For the first time since last November, he knew he was safe with her. For the first time since last November, he could *breathe*.

3. Chapter 3

Monday, November 12, 1984

Joyce had thought up every excuse possible, but Will had somehow managed to convince her not only to let him go back to school, but to let him go to Hopper's cabin afterwards, too. She knew she had to let him go eventually, and that the sooner they could both step back into the real world, the easier it would be. But now, parked in front of the school, she was beginning to panic.

"Will, sweetie, are you sure-"

"Mom, it's okay," he turned away from the window to smile at her. "I'll be fine. Really."

"If you change your mind-"

"I can call you. I know. But I won't."

She sighed, ran a shaky hand over his hair, brushed at a piece of lint on his jacket. Not only was he still recovering from sharing his body with the Mind Flayer, and she from almost losing him, but as the lab had been thrust into the spotlight, they'd gone with it.

It had been easy to change their story to match Jonathan and Nancy's: while in the woods, Will had been exposed to a small amount of the same leaked gas that had killed Barbara Holland, leaving him comatose. The lab had found and treated him just in time to save him, but had continued to bring him in to monitor and manage the incident's long term physical and emotional effects.

While this satisfied most of the town, Joyce knew that kids could be cruel. They'd teased him before, and today their whispers would be louder than ever.

"Stay with your friends, okay? And stay warm. And when you make it to the cabin, don't forget to radio Hopper. And you don't have to come home by yourself, he'll drive you when he gets off work-"

"Mom, I'm going to be late."

"Right. Okay." She leaned across to kiss him on the forehead. "I love you. So much."

"I love you, too." He climbed from the car, and bent down to smile at her through the window. "Bye."

"Bye."

She watched him walk away, a smile plastered onto her face until he disappeared inside and she sagged, forehead against steering wheel. *Please, please, please, let everything be okay.*

Now that he had Dr. Owens in his pocket, Hopper wasn't half as worried about the lab. The FBI, on the other hand, was a whole new kind of dangerous. He'd worked day and night to ensure that when they began their investigation, they'd need his help every step of the way, and that nothing they found could possibly lead them to Eleven.

The official investigation had begun today, and though it had gone as smoothly as it could have, he was totally drained, and he still had one hurdle to jump before he could eat dinner and fall into bed. As he walked up the cabin steps, childish laughter floated towards him, and despite his exhaustion, he stopped a moment and just listened.

How strange, this feeling. How... nice. He wanted to let them go on like this forever.

Instead, he knocked on the door, and when it opened, all was quiet. Eleven peeked up at him over the back of the couch, where she sat pressed against Mike. Will was perched on the bed (his cheeks had more color in them than they had in over a year), the Mayfield girl was curled up in the arm chair, and, for some reason, Dustin and Lucas were sprawled on the floor.

"Hi?" Eleven whispered.

"Hey, kid." He hung up his hat.

"What happened today?" Mike asked. "How much do they know?"

"Jesus Christ," he shrugged out of his jacket. "Let me sit down first."

"Bad?" Eleven asked, voice cracking.

"No, no, it's okay. But I need to eat. And then... then we need to talk."

They followed him to the kitchen, all cramming in around the tiny table opposite him.

If they wanted to visit Eleven, he explained between mouthfuls of leftover mashed potatoes, they had to have their own set of Don't Be Stupid Rules- and there were a lot. None of them went to the cabin alone. Both Hopper and Joyce knew when they were going. They told their parents they'd be "exploring in the woods-" technically not a lie, and impossible to follow up on. They took different routes every day. When they got to the cabin, they checked in with Hopper, who would check in with Joyce. They all had to stay inside. They couldn't stay past sundown. If they left the cabin, they checked in with Hopper, who would check in with Joyce. They couldn't come every day- three days a week, tops.

Unsurprisingly, this was where Mike cut him off. "Three days a week?"

Hopper did his best to keep his expression hard as he met the boy's eyes. He was sharing a chair with Eleven, and though Hopper couldn't see it, he knew they were holding hands under the table. They just couldn't keep them off of each other.

Mike held his stare, angry and unblinking. He was the only one of the kids who wasn't even a little afraid of Hopper. Although Hopper would never admit it, *he* was afraid of *Mike*.

"Where did you go before, kid? The arcade? Go to the arcade. Keep up appearances, or people will wonder what you're doing instead."

"But-"

"You can talk on the radio on your days off. Which brings me to rule number ten: when you talk on the radio, you don't mention anything related to the lab or the upside down. You don't even say your names."

Mike glowered, but Dustin perked right up. "You mean we have to

use code names?"

"This is Bard to Ranger, come in, Ranger."

"This is Ranger."

"Have you done the math homework yet? Over."

"No."

"... No, over? Over."

"Dude, seriously?"

"It's simple etiquette, you know this! Cleric, come in. Over."

"Try channel 11. Over and out."

"... Cleric? Do you copy?"

"Yeah, I'm here. Is everything okay?"

"You're supposed to say, 'Bard, this is Cleric. Go ahead.' Over."

"Mage?"

"Hi, Mage. Say, 'Over,' when you're done. Over."

"Mage. Over?"

"Good! That was good! We'll keep working on it. Over."

"Did you need something?"

"Have you done the math homework?"

"Do it yourself."

"You suck. Not you, Mage. Cleric, you suck. Over and out."

4. Chapter 4

Hi! Just wanted to say a quick but BIG thank you for all the love in your sweet reviews! This is the first time I've published anything I've written, and I've been so anxious about it that I couldn't work up to courage to read them until now, but they're so kind and so encouraging. Sending you each internet bear hugs!

Monday, November 12, 1984

"For the second time that evening, Hopper knocked on the cabin door twice, once, three times. When it opened up, Eleven was waiting for him. He sighed.

Of course. She'd been awfully quiet as he'd explained the new rules; he shouldn't have hoped that had been the end of it. "Hey, kid." How could he explain himself?

The door closed behind him, and she lurched forward to hug him. "Thank you."

Oh. His heart stuttered, and for a moment, he couldn't move. He remembered another girl, smaller and crowned in blonde curls, clinging to him just the same-

No, that wasn't fair. This was worlds different... but he'd come to love her every bit as much. He wanted her to be happy, but he had to keep her safe. And somehow, she understood that. Slowly, he folded her in his arms, pressing a kiss to the top of her head.

"Someday," he told her, "there won't be any rules. Someday, you'll be free. Okay? I promise."

Friday, November 16, 1984

Hopper's first rule insisted that they found safety in numbers, which meant Mike couldn't come see Eleven alone (simply a side effect he was sure Hopper was very sorry for). Luckily, if they wanted a

moment to themselves, their friends were gracious enough to ignore them.

It wasn't like *that*. She hadn't tried to kiss him again, and though he probably thought about it far too much, he hadn't tried to kiss her, either.

Sometimes they'd talk, heads bent close together and voices hushed. They talked about Eleven's flashbacks, or Mike's lingering guilt that he hadn't been able to keep her safe, or Hopper's soft side, or how Will seemed to be coping. About petty drama at school, or his parents' latest fight, or who had the highest score at the arcade, or bits of the book Eleven was reading that she didn't understand. The kinds of things that, for so long, they'd both only wished they could share with the other.

But sometimes (most of the time) words were too much. Not enough. Simply... unnecessary. Instead, Eleven would fit herself against his side (if he was lucky, she'd lay her head on his shoulder) and they'd listen to the other's breathing. After the chaos of everything, amidst the settling dust, it made them both feel like they were going to be okay again. It was slow, and sometimes painful, but they were healing. They were growing back together.

Wednesday, November 21, 1984

It felt strange, stepping into the rest of the oblivious world after Everything. As if she'd suddenly grown and didn't quite fit in her shoes anymore. She had to pretend that she did, though. She had to pretend nothing had changed.

It was only with the others- the others who *knew*- that Max felt like she was real anymore, even though she was only now getting to see them for what *they* really were. Lucas might have seemed dodgy at first, but he was serious, perceptive, and protective as hell. Dustin was the heart of the group, the funniest (sometimes without meaning to be) but possibly the smartest, too. Will was still just as quiet, but he was without a doubt one of the strongest, bravest people she'd ever met. And *Mike*-

Lucas, Dustin, and Will were thrilled to see "the old Mike" coming back. For Max, the change was most jarring of all- in the best way, of course: from sullen and volatile to warm and gentle. The wall he'd put up between them disappeared, and was all but forgotten. He smiled more and more, blooming like a flower until, one afternoon, Dustin had cracked a joke and a big, bright, childish laugh slipped from his lips. The other boys perked up at the long-forgotten sound, watching gleefully as he toppled back into Eleven's lap.

Eleven. As thrilled as Max was that Mike suddenly welcomed her into the party, she was equally frustrated when Eleven immediately sent her back to square one. Lucas told her not to take it personally, that Eleven had every right to trust issues and no concept of social code, but she was convinced it went beyond that. After all, Will had walked right into her heart.

Therapy at the lab was no longer even an option, but he'd found something better in her. When he talked to her, she gave him no judgement, no fear, no pity, only understanding and occasional advice.

His brother, Jonathan, fell quickly into Eleven's good graces, too. He was considerate and careful in the way he moved around her, and always spoke to her in the same gentle but honest way he spoke to Will. He even brought her gifts: music and movies to pass the time when she was alone.

Max tried to follow his lead. She dialed back the sarcasm. She bit her tongue when she wanted to snap. She did her best to soften her more aggressive habits and her quick temper, reminding herself again and again, *You are not like Billy*. Still, Eleven held Max at an arms length, something unspoken wedged between them.

Finally, in a rare moment alone as they walked between classes, she confronted Mike about it. If anyone would know, it was him.

"She saw us," he admitted, a little guiltily. "At school, in the gym. She pushed you off your skateboard."

Max replayed the moment in her mind. "So, what, she hates me for trying to be your friend?"

"..."

"Woah, *woah!* I do *not* like you that way!"

Mike snorted. "Yeah, I know."

Oh, god.

Friday, November 23, 1984

Wednesday, she'd chickened out. Thursday, thanks to Hopper's stupid Don't Be Stupid Rules, they didn't visit the cabin. This gave Max plenty of time (more than she wanted, really) to worry about how to say what she had to say to Eleven before they came back on Friday. Still, when Mike got up to go to the bathroom, she had to force herself to seize what might be her only opportunity to talk to Eleven with any sort of privacy. Turning quietly away from the others, who were all deep in a stupid argument about the pros and cons of keeping a mogwai from *Gremlins* as a pet, she scooted her chair closer to the other girl.

"Eleven?" she whispered.

Eleven's walls came up *fast*, and she eyed Max with obvious distrust.

Max pushed down her irritation and took a deep breath. "I understand now, about that day in the gym. But it wasn't like that, I don't like him that way. I just want to be friends. And I really want to be your friend, too. Can we start over?"

For a terribly long time, Eleven only stared. Max was sure she was going to say no- or maybe telekinetically snap her neck. But then, just when she thought she couldn't take it anymore, Eleven *smiled*. "Start over," she agreed

Her relief was overwhelming, and Max couldn't help but grin. "Cool."

Eleven hesitated, then whispered, "Bitchin'."

Max's eyes bugged, but by some miracle, she managed not to laugh. *Dustin*, on the other hand, shrieked with glee. *Of course* those stalkers

had been eavesdropping-

"Bitchin'? *Bitchin'*? El, *where* did you hear *that*?"

5. Chapter 5

This chapter is, once again, pretty angsty. I love Nancy so much; she's so wonderfully complex, and I had to explore that. But I promise the next chapter will be extra sweet! ❄❄❄

Saturday, December 1, 1984

After Barb's funeral, Nancy had hoped she'd feel some sort of closure. Some sort of freedom. Some sort of *anything*. Instead, Barb was even more dead than before, her parents were in twice as much pain, and Nancy was numb from her head all the way to her toes. She couldn't find a word to say to Jonathan on the way home, and though he offered to come in and stay a while with her, she quietly declined. She left him at the end of her driveway without a kiss and, more alone than ever, went upstairs to lay in bed with her shoes still on and stare at the ceiling.

Maybe she'd been bottling her grief up so long that now it *couldn't* come out. Maybe she'd never feel anything again. Maybe she'd disappear altogether. If she did, would Barb be waiting for her on the other side? *God*.

It was Mike who finally found her. When he asked, she couldn't even find the energy to pretend she was okay. She just closed her eyes and mumbled something about leaving her alone- but of course he wouldn't. He stepped tentatively into her room, closing the door behind him, and sat lightly on the edge of her bed. "For what it's worth," he whispered, "I'm really sorry."

"It's not your fault," she whispered back.

For a long moment, it was quiet. "It's not *your* fault."

It was all she'd needed anyone to tell her for over a year, coming from the last person she would have expected. Whatever had been holding her together began to crumble, giving way to an unexpectedly hot flash of *anger*. A little bit at Mike, but mostly at herself. "It is," she choked. "It is my fault."

"No, it's the lab's fault."

"I left her. I shouldn't have left her. I was such a shitty friend."

"If you hadn't left, the demogorgon might've gotten you, too."

"Maybe it should've."

She immediately regretted saying it. She opened her eyes and sat up to find Mike looking at her with his face all twisted, her sour words just as awful as a taste of lemon. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that."

"Yes you did."

"Mike--"

"Yes you did, " he argued, "because I used to think the same thing when Eleven was gone."

Her heart skipped a beat. *Oh.*

"But it's not true," he continued, softer. "Barb didn't deserve what happened to her, but you couldn't have saved her. That's not your fault, and it doesn't make you a bad person, either." He seemed to grow as he spoke- taller, stronger, steadier. "Even after she was gone, you never gave up on her. You wouldn't let the people who hurt her win- and now they can't hurt anyone ever again. *That's* who you are."

Finally, finally, *finally*, the tears came. She leaned forward, tugging him into a hug. "Thank you."

He patted her shoulder, began to say something else, then hesitated. "Do you want to come for dinner tomorrow?"

Sunday, December 2, 1984

Sunday dinner at the cabin had become the most important part of the week for Mike and the Byers. The Chief was a terrible cook, but no one was there for him or for the food. They were there for Eleven. As they stepped inside, Joyce rushed to smother her in motherly love. Jonathan bent down to ask how she was feeling and offer her a paper

bag present (a movie and a mix tape; he'd been bringing her new ones every week).

Nancy just smiled, unsure of what to say. Eleven responded with a shy little bobble of the head before Mike and Will swept her up and away.

It was the first time Nancy really got to see Eleven as herself. She was *darling*. Molly Ringwald. Judy Garland. Shirley Temple. But it was still there, in the way she moved but also the way she could become perfectly still if she wanted: that something different, something *wild* about her. She was always on high alert- and she wasn't the only one.

Mike held her hand and looked at her like he couldn't believe she was really there, like she was a dream that might be over at any moment. Joyce sat on the edge of the Chief's cot, her eyes anxiously following Will's every move. Chief Hopper lingered in the background, keeping a quiet watch over everything. The gun still strapped to his hip glittered in the dim light.

They all knew too much. They'd all felt too much. They were damaged irreparably... and despite that, Nancy realized, they were able to be happy, too. They were able to find comfort in being with those who understood and focus on the good things happening now.

They discussed the most recent developments in the investigation at the lab, and they laughed about the movie Jonathan had brought Eleven last week (*Attack of the Killer Tomatoes*). They reassured Hopper when he overcooked the chicken ("Still better than frozen dinners," Eleven teased.), and they argued about philosophy in Lord of the Rings. They did a puzzle Bob had bought Will, and they played every silly card game they could think of.

It struck her hard: she didn't need to free herself from what had happened. She couldn't. She didn't have to leave Barb behind. She *shouldn't*. To forget would be terrible. Instead, she could grieve and carry Barb with her *and* be happy, and with the people around her, she didn't have to bottle that mess up. They were there for her. They were in this together.

Afterwards, as they walked back to their cars, Mike stepped up beside Hopper. The Chief stubbornly refused to acknowledge him, eyes straight ahead and mouth fixed in what seemed to Mike to be a permanent frown.

"Do you know what the Snow Ball is?" he asked.

"What?"

"The Snow Ball," he repeated. "It's the dance every year before winter break. It's in two weeks, on the 15th."

Nothing.

"Last year, right before the demogorgon got her, I promised her I'd take her."

Finally, Hopper stopped and looked down at him. Mike wished it weren't so dark, so that he might be able to better see his face and tell what the man was thinking. "You... *promised?*"

6. Chapter 6

Tuesday, December 4, 1984

It was hardly seven o'clock, and the evening sky was already a cloudy, starless purple. The streetlamp out front of the Byers' house had fried when Eleven closed the gate and they'd yet to fix it, so the only light came through their front door, left standing open despite the cold. Joyce stood just out of his reach, biting the inside of her cheek the way she always did when she was trying to decide whether or not to say what she wanted to say.

The silence became too much, and finally, he asked, "Alright?"

She sighed heavily, a little white cloud that lingered at her lips. "The Snow Ball?"

He raised an eyebrow. "You heard that?"

Shrugging, she let her eyes fall to her feet. "Will mentioned it Friday. He wants to go, too."

Shit. Hopper wasn't sure how to reply to that. "He seems to be doing better," he tried.

It earned a humorless laugh. "He's leaving me in the dust," she muttered, kicking at a loose nail.

Damnit. He hated the pain and the grief and the desperation in her voice. Once again, she'd been left dangling from the metaphorical edge of a cliff by her fingernails, and was still struggling to claw her way back up to sanity. "Joyce-"

"I think- I think he's already missed out on too much. If he feels ready, I don't want to keep holding him back."

"... Oh yeah?"

"I mean, maybe I can chaperone or something."

There was a beat of silence- for a moment, he couldn't figure out

whether or not she was serious. "That's-"

"Too much. I know." She heaved a sigh. "He just wants to be with his friends, and he deserves it." Her eyes flickered up to his. "And so does El."

He supposed he should've seen that coming. It was an understatement, Hopper thought. That little girl deserved the whole damned world- and even though it was stupid beyond stupid, he wanted so badly to give it to her. It'd had him at war with himself for the past year. It'd torn his heart apart- and still, it'd never been quite as hard to say "no" as it was now. Everything that had been standing in their way had suddenly changed, and the Snow Ball seemed so innocent, so simple.

Joyce shrugged, stepping back. "Anyway, I should go... get something started for dinner. It's getting late, Will is probably starving. Thanks again, for dropping him off."

"Of course."

"Goodnight, Jim."

"... Goodnight."

Friday, December 7, 1984

Hopper sat in the pub's parking lot, chin on his steering wheel, staring at the little white envelope Dr. Owens had given him. It seemed unreal.

In hardly a month, the "investigative team" had determined that there was "no risk of further gas leaks," finished searching the lab's files and collecting physical evidence, "arrested" half its staff, and relocated or destroyed much of their equipment. Today, they were locking up its doors for good. What better way to celebrate than lunch with Dr. Owens?

He wanted to hate the man- he worked with the lab, and Hopper hated the lab with every bone in his body. But whenever Hopper most needed help, Dr. Owens would step up and do something almost

good, and Hopper was left dazed and confused. This- this little white envelope- was best and worst of all.

This little white envelope was a one-way ticket out of the darkness and into the light. A new life with an endless number of possible futures. And Hopper...

He nudged the slip of paper inside up again, to make sure it was still there: her name... and his.

With no one there to see it, he let a smile slip across his face. There was no overstating the magnitude of what he'd gotten himself into, the endless horrible ways it could go wrong- but there was no fear, either. Really, he hadn't felt this right in a long time.

He could no longer accept the black hole. It was time to snuff it out. For it to return all that it had stolen. He was going to do right by Eleven if it killed him.

Sunday, December 9, 1984

Hopper stood on the porch smoking, waiting. Their voices reached him first, soft but bright with laughter, and then their shadows, dancing ahead, long and delicate. Finally, their makers came through the trees, jumping playfully over his tripwires. They greeted him cheerfully as they climbed up the front steps- all except Mike, who brushed by without a word. Rolling his eyes, Hopper stubbed out his cigarette and followed him inside.

However upset he was, Mike couldn't help but smile when Eleven stepped into his arms, his cheeks glowing pink. He made sure she was okay and told her that he'd missed her and listened intently as she told him about the book she'd finished that afternoon. Even after the others joined them, his eyes never left her and that blush never faded.

They fell into what was quickly becoming a familiar rhythm. They joked about Jonathan's movies and Hopper's cooking. They told stories of the past week's adventures and misadventures for Eleven to collect. And when everyone had finished eating, the cabin fell silent,

and Hopper took center stage.

"It's all played by ear from here," he told them. "They'll blast out of here as soon as they can without seeming negligent. Now, that doesn't mean we're safe. They get it in their heads that El might be alive? That's real trouble. So until they leave, until they're no longer listening, we're gonna have to keep this quiet."

"Okay," Joyce nodded. "How much longer are we talking?"

He sighs, picking at a notch in the edge of the table. "Not sure. Owens says a year."

"A *year*?" Mike burst, incredulous.

"Something like that. Except... there was something else," he murmured, eyes meeting Mike's for a moment before returning to Eleven's. "The Snow Ball."

It seemed to knock the breath out of her- Mike, too. It was a full ten seconds before he recovered enough to ask, voice brimming with hope, "Is that a yes?"

"... Yes."

As everyone funneled out the door, Mike lingered, still holding tight to her hand. "Goodnight, El," he whispered.

"Goodnight," she whispered back. She missed him again already. Wasn't that strange?

He hesitated, balancing on the tips of his toes- and then swooped in to kiss her on the cheek. It was quick, but it made her heart skip a beat and her whole face warm in the nicest way. She smiled and he smiled back, eyes all twinkly even in the dark.

"Wheeler!" Hopper called.

"Goodnight," he told her again, and let go. As she watched him run down the porch steps to catch up with the others, she let her fingers brush over her cheek and the ghost of him that she could still feel

there. For the thousandth time, she thought to herself that there was no one and nothing else in the world as wonderful as Mike Wheeler.

Friday, December 14, 1984

"El?" Hopper knocked on her door. "You ready?"

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. If she wasn't ready now, she'd never be. Stepping away from the mirror, she walked across the room to let him in; after all the time she'd spent worrying about her makeup, she wasn't about to risk any telepathic stress-induced nosebleeds.

"Hey!" he grinned wide, taking her hand and twirling her round. "Look at you!"

Nancy had brought her a few old dresses, and Eleven had chosen one with big puffed sleeves- like all the pretty girls wore in *Anne of Green Gables*.

"Not bad," Hopper told her. Coming from him, Eleven understood this was a compliment, and she smiled past her nerves.

He lowered himself down on one knee. "Before we go, I've, ah... I've got one more thing for you."

Her smile dropped, a thousand awful memories flooding her mind. "... Good?"

"You tell me."

She hesitated, taking the envelope he offered ever-so-gingerly. She read the single slip of paper inside, caught her breath, and read it again before looking back up at him. "Jane Hopper?"

"If you want to be. Come here." Careful not to crumple the paper, he took both her hands in his, folding something else into them. A little blue hair tie. "This... *was*... Sarah's. I kept it when we cut her hair. Sometimes, people lose their hair when they get sick..." He sighed, and she could almost see him pushing those thoughts away. "Sometimes the people who *should* be our home just can't be. Like

Sarah. Like her mom. Like your mom. It's not fair, but there's nothing we can do to change it. And I know you've struggled with that. With finding your home, a place in this world."

He took a deep breath and forced his next words out. "You can say no. I know I'm difficult and we're messy and it's dangerous and that's not going to change. But no matter what, I promise I'll be here for you as long as you want me, and I will do everything I can."

That was more than enough for her. She stepped forward, wrapping her arms around his neck and holding on tight. "*Thank you.*"

Hopper stepped into the lobby of Hawkins Middle School's gym and was nearly trampled by a group of squeaky-voiced girls in puffy dresses rushing towards the bathroom. *Christ.*

Nancy, stationed right at the door, caught his eye and nodded slightly. Ten minutes, then she'd get Mike to quietly walk Eleven out. But first, a quick peek...

They'd gone all out: balloons and streamers and coffee filter snowflakes dressed the gym up like a real winter wonderland. It smelled strongly of hairspray and bubblegum, but beneath that, impossible to completely drown out, remained the salty ghost of preteen sweat. In the center of it all, a mess of scrawny kids held each other at arms' length and swayed stiffly to Journey's "Faithfully."

It took him a moment to find them, dancing way in the back. Eleven had melted completely against Mike, her head tucked into his shoulder as he spun her in slow circles. Still, he could see her smile glowing from all the way across the room.

Oh, hell.

**Oprah voice* YOU get a parallel!*

WOW, that's the end of season 2! Another big thank you for reading, especially to those who've reviewed!

I can't promise regular updates (I guess I took quite a break between

chapters here! Sorry!) but I do want to continue this story with my own take on where these characters go next (probably mostly in one shots, but maybe with a real plot after it's canonically supposed to thicken again in summer of '85), so I hope you'll stay with me (and I'll try not to leave you hanging for so long again)!

7. Chapter 7

Sunday, December 23, 1984

Eleven sat by the window, chin resting on the sill. Jim had long ago hammered boards over all the windows, but through the cracks between them, she could still see pieces of a world all in white.

As the past year spun itself out, the changing seasons had filled her with wonder- the woods bursting with flowers in the spring, turning green in the summer, then dappled all shades of red and yellow in the fall- but she didn't like winter, and she *hated* the snow. It was the only thing that made her glad to be locked up in the cabin.

The cabin, in turn, had become a sight to behold. Christmas was only two days away- a strange holiday with strange customs, and even though Eleven wasn't sure he knew exactly what he was doing, Jim was determined that she wouldn't miss out on any of them. First, they'd strung a rainbow of little lights from the rafters. Then he'd brought her one giant-sized sock- no, a *stocking*, and hung it over the wood stove so it would get full of presents. Finally, he'd come home with a big tree to plant *inside* the cabin. They'd dressed it up in tinsel and popcorn on string, and a big gold star hat. *Very* strange.

Of course, there were good things about Christmas, too: the calendar box full of chocolates, the Christmas specials on TV, the dusty holiday jazz records Jim played in the evenings. But nothing beat winter break. Winter break meant no more school until January 7th, and no school meant extended visiting hours.

For two whole wonderful weeks, her friends could come almost any time they wanted, which meant that they came nearly every day. They played board games, they baked cookies, they built pillow forts that filled her whole bedroom. She learned all the lyrics to Max's favorite Cyndi Lauper songs, she read Dustin's entire collection of X-men comics, and she kissed Mike more than once.

Jonathan would stop by sometimes, bringing new music or rented video tapes. Nancy came over once, too- she painted Eleven's nails sparkly pink, and even let her keep the little bottle of polish.

Tonight was extra special, though. The Byers, the Wheelers, Dustin, Lucas, Max, and even Steve, too, were coming for an early Christmas dinner. It was the first time they'd all be together again since she'd closed the gate. Dustin called it an "extended-party reunion."

"El?"

She looked back to find Jim watching her over the top of his newspaper. He'd told her twice already not to sit so close to the window- that she'd "catch a cold," which didn't make any sense to her at all. She fully expected him to tell her again, but this time, he only asked, "You warm enough? I can put more wood in the stove."

She hesitated, then nodded, turning back to the window just as a group of huddled figures emerged from the trees. "They're here," she breathed, jumping up from her chair and rushing to the door.

Mike was, as always, the first inside, dropping his backpack and reaching out for her. "Hi, El," he smiled, nose scrunching up the way it did when he was happiest, and dropped a kiss on her cheek.

"Move over, googly eyes," Max grumbled, pushing her way past them. "I'm freezing out here."

Lucas followed close behind, flashing Eleven a grin as he passed. "Welcome to winter in Hawkins."

Joyce had made enough food to feed an army: two whole chickens, mashed potatoes with gravy, carrots, green bean casserole, cornbread, cranberry sauce, and a fruit cake for dessert. She reheated them one by one in the cabin's little oven, pretending not to notice when Eleven dipped a finger in for a taste.

For lack of chairs and table space, everyone sat on the living room floor, eating off of paper plates between fits of laughter. It was a crowded mess of elbows and knees, but Eleven didn't mind. She was happy to have all the people she cared about so close; to finally be at the heart of things. It was the opposite of lonely.

It was close to midnight before everyone began to drift toward the door, yawning but still laughing. They climbed into jackets and hats and scarves, each stopping to give her a hug, ruffle her hair, and wish her a "Merry Christmas" before they stumbled out the door.

Eleven hovered just inside the doorway. Light spilled out all around her, illuminating a sliver of silver-snowy forest, cold and unfeeling. One by one, it swallowed her friends whole, snuffing out their laughter and all the warmth that it had brought her.

Still buttoning his coat, Mike stopped to watch with her. "Are you alright?" he asked.

She looked up. Against the backdrop of snow, he was all soft hair and long eyelashes and freckles on rosy cheeks. He made it look beautiful. He made it all warm again.

She smiled, nodded. "Yes."

"I probably won't see you again till after Christmas. I'll call you on my radio when I can, but I don't... I don't know when that'll be. I'm sorry."

"It's okay," she assured him. "I understand."

He leaned down to kiss her, and she felt it all the way down in her toes. Would she ever get used to that? She hoped not.

"Goodnight, El," he whispered. "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas," she whispered back. Merry *everything*.

Tuesday, December 25, 1984

Eleven woke to a crash in the living room. She sat straight up, listening closely, but all was quiet. Heart pounding, she slipped out of bed, shrugging on a sweater and stepping out into the living room.

The rainbow lights were on, and the Christmas tree was surrounded by presents, all wrapped in shiny red and green paper. In the kitchen, Jim stood over the stove, juggling bowls and pans and eggs.

"Morning?" she asked.

He turned, smiling down at her. "There she is! Good morning, El. Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas."

"Did you see what you got in your stocking?"

Eyes widening, she hurried across the room. She had been skeptical of its present-summoning abilities, but sure enough, it had been stuffed with a big box of Eggos. "Not bad, huh?" Jim grinned, winked. "Come and put them in the freezer."

She did so, and was rewarded with a mug of hot chocolate and a tall stack of hot Eggos, piled with whipped cream and stuck through with a candy cane. "Go on, eat up," he told her, "and then we can open presents."

Eleven unwrapped each present gently, not wanting to tear the wrapping paper. One by one, a jewelry box, a Player's Handbook, and a dream catcher emerged, making a neat little row at her knees.

Jim reminded her *again* that it was okay to tear the wrapping paper, a hint of exasperation sneaking into his voice, but she ignored him. She opened a puzzle with Princess Leia on it, a game called Connect Four, a box of chocolates. She opened a book of crossword puzzles, a pack of socks, *Synchronicity* by The Police on vinyl. She opened a lava lamp, a silver necklace with a "J" on it, a sleeve of glittery hair clips- and finally, a small photo album titled "Snow Ball, 1984."

There were pictures from the photo booth- pictures with Mike and pictures with the whole party, which got increasingly silly as she flipped through them. There were pictures taken from across the room, too: dancing with Mike, sitting at the table and sharing pretzels with Will, marveling at the braid in a very flustered Max's hair. She let her fingers trace the smile on her face in every one, the same smile finding its way back to her now.

"Is that the last one?" Jim asked.

Setting the album aside, she jumped to her feet. "I have something for you."

"Oh," he blinked in surprise. "Really?"

She rushed to her room, pulling the little newspaper-wrapped box from under her bed before returning to perch on the edge of the couch beside him.

"What's this?" he murmured, fumbling to get the paper off beneath the mess of tape she'd used but finally pulling out the little white box inside. "It's... toothpaste. Thanks, kid. I love toothpaste."

"No," she shifted anxiously. "It's inside."

He popped it open, tipping out a length of braided blue string.

"One for you, from me," she tapped the hair tie on her own wrist. She'd done her best to replicate it, pulling the thread from a fraying sweater and braiding it just like Max had taught her. "So we match."

For a moment, he only stared, face unreadable.

"You don't want it?" she whispered.

He shook his head. "No, no, I love it," he rasped, reaching out with one arm. "Come here."

She smiled, tucking herself against his chest and closing her eyes. She felt safe here. She wished she could give him more than just a bracelet, but right now, it was enough. It was more than enough.

Oops, I did it again...

Sorry for another longer than expected hiatus. I started this chapter with the intention of posting it for the holidays (HA), but my life has gotten a LOT busier, and it's sent my anxiety through the roof.

That said, thank you! so! much! for your sweet messages! They mean the world to me. I'm blowing internet kisses right back.

While I'm not sure how often I'll be able to update, I promise that I'm not abandoning this. I hope you'll stick with me!

xo

8. Chapter 8

Saturday, December 29th

Eleven screamed herself awake, sitting straight up and throwing everything around her against the far wall. The noise was terrible: wood cracking, glass shattering, and metal screaming in protest as it was torn apart midair, only to come crashing back down in one great mess.

She was so scared, she couldn't breathe. She had to move, she had to run-

Except- where was she? It didn't look like The Lab. It didn't smell like The Lab.

The door opened with a bang, and Jim spilled inside, eyes wide, rifle up. He swept it across the room, ready for a fight- but they were alone. They were alone, and they were safe, it was all only a dream.

Except it wasn't *only* a dream. It was a memory.

Her tears welled up and, before she could stop them, spilled over. When Jim saw, it was as though all the rage drained out of him. He left his gun by the door and rushed across the room, sinking heavily down on the edge of the bed and meeting her halfway in a crushing hug. Usually so strong and steady, she could feel his heart racing and his hands shaking. *She'd done that.*

"I'm sorry," she choked. She'd been so stupid, she'd thought this bit was over, she'd let her guard down and it had caught her unprepared-

"No, no, don't be. You've done nothing wrong," he was, as always, quick to reassure her. *"I'm sorry, kid. I'm so, so sorry."*

Like thunder, an angry banging at the door ripped Hopper from sleep once again. Quick as lightning, he was up on his feet, reaching for his rifle- but a little hand found his wrist, stopping him before he could take another step.

It was Eleven- he'd fallen asleep in her room, propped up against the bed frame with her head on his shoulder. She had fallen when he rose, and then nearly fallen off her bed reaching for him. Her face was twisted with worry.

Oh, no. There were so many things he still wanted to tell her-

"Get your coat and your boots, go out the window-"

"No," she whispered. "It's Mike."

"What?" Mental whiplash. "At the door? Why? What's wrong?"

"I slept through Good Morning."

He stilled, though his heart still beat like a kick drum in his head. Almost in sync, the banging came again. "Mike Wheeler is breaking down our door at... *eight thirty on a Saturday morning* because you didn't answer his 'good morning' call?"

"Yes." She didn't seem to understand at all how entirely ridiculous that was. For a moment, he considered telling her- considered the dark shadows under those wide eyes, and how tightly her hand gripped his-

The banging came again. Sure enough, it was their password, warped by hysteria.

Hopper sighed, running his free hand over his face. Seemed these kids were going to be the death of him, yet. "Stay here."

"But Mike-"

"I'll tell him you're alive," he grumbled. "Stay here."

After her stepdad had broken her skateboard, Max had gotten a bike for Christmas- much better to keep up with the boys. She'd gotten a walkie talkie, too, and when the air was clear, she could talk to them all the way from home.

Their aimless banter became the background music of her life. It

drowned out the noisy rock-n-roll Billy listened to while he worked out in the living room, and the corny rom-coms her mother liked to watch on TV, and her step-dad's manic laughter. It made her feel wanted, included, safe.

But when Mike had called that morning, out of his mind because Eleven wasn't answering, no one else had answered, either. The radio silence was almost eerie. Max knew he'd go by himself if he had to, Hopper's rules be damned, but she considered it her chance.

She'd had to chase him all the way there (the boy could *move* when he wanted). She'd been half sure he was overreacting, half terrified of what they might find when they got there- but the longer they stood locked out on the porch, knocking with no answer, the more her fear grew.

Neither of them had ever been happier to see Hawkins' grumpy old police chief than when he finally wrenched the door open to scowl down at the both of them. "Alright, alright," he barked. "That's enough."

"Hi, Chief," she breathed. "We tried to call-"

But Mike wasted no time with words, trying instead to push right past him and through the door.

"Woah, there," Hopper grabbed him by the arm, half lifting him back out onto the porch and pulling the door resolutely closed behind him. "Not so fast, kid."

All at once, any semblance of trust or respect that Mike might have regained for Hopper after the Snow Ball disappeared. "Let me go-"

"Not yet. We need to talk." He sat heavily on the porch steps, pulling Mike down beside him. Reluctantly, Max followed.

"Is she okay?" Mike demanded.

"She's alive. She's been better."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"It means she's got more than enough in her head to keep her up at night."

Max's stomach dropped. "The mind flayer?" she asked, but Hopper shook his head.

"The mind flayer isn't the worst monster she's faced."

Mike huffed in anger and disgust. "Brenner."

Hopper eyed him in appreciation. Mike was too distracted to notice, but Max caught it. "That's right, kid. And we might know pieces of it, but we can't understand what she's been through, and we can't understand the pain she's still in because of it. That's all her own. We can't fix it. All we can do is be there to hold her hand through it."

"Then *why are we still out here?*"

Hopper rolled his eyes, rising to his feet. "Come on, kid." He paused. "Watch your step."

When he opened the door, Mike made straight for Eleven's room, unfazed by its unholy *wreckage*- splintered wood, torn velvet, broken glass, *what the hell?*- in his quest to reach her.

She sat cross-legged on the pillows of her bed, the only whole piece of furniture remaining. She looked terribly tired, and terribly guilty. "Good morning," she whispered.

Mike shook his head, climbing onto her bed and pulling her into a hug. "I'm not mad, El. Do you want to talk about it?"

She shook her head, pushing her nose into his shirt. "I just want to forget."

"What can I do?"

She held him a little tighter. "Stay?"

"I wish I could do more."

"I know," she sighed. "But this is good."

The Chief made them all breakfast: waffles, bacon, and eggs, overdone, but edible with enough salt and pepper. Mike and Eleven filled their plates and ate on the couch, still tangled up in each other, whispering. It was nice to see, but it was no place for Max. Instead, she sat at the kitchen table, reading the comics in the previous day's newspaper and doing her best to ignore the way Hopper was staring at her.

"Alright?" he finally asked.

She nodded, stabbing at her eggs. "Never better."

He sighed, leaning back in his seat. "Come on, kid," he prodded.

She gave an equally overdramatic sigh, setting down her fork and looking up at the ceiling. "What happened in there?" she asked.

"Eleven... forgot where she was."

Max wanted to roll her eyes. He couldn't have oversimplified it more. "The way Will used to?" she pressed.

Hopper cringed. "A lot *like* Will used to. It's called post-traumatic stress disorder. It's-" his hands flailed as he searched for an explanation- "it'll really fuck you over. And if you're, say, a powerful telekinetic, it could make you do some really dangerous things. That's not- you shouldn't be *scared* of her-"

Woah, woah, woah. Max slammed on the brakes. "I'm *not* scared."

He raised both hands. "I didn't say that. I just said you don't need to be."

"Well, I'm not."

"Good."

"Good."

She looked down, picked up her fork, stabbing again at her eggs. The Chief sipped his coffee. In the living room, Mike and Eleven

continued to whisper, totally oblivious.

"I'm *not* scared," she told her eggs, and it was the truth. "I'm mad."

"At Eleven?"

"No! No. At the world. For being so shit."

Hopper snorted. "Yeah?" She dared to look up at him again. It was as if the dust between them settled, and finally, she could *see* him. "You and me both."

*IF YOU'RE EXCITED FOR SEASON 3 IN 3 DAYS SAY
AAAAAAAAAHHHH!*